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# Totemism

By E. V. Hill

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The fuller our knowledge of the beliefs of a people, the clearer will be an apprehension of the characteristics and needs of that people.

All peoples have had their stage of totemism. It pertains to a state of development but little higher than the lowest, and although many have reached a high civilization, yet vestiges of it remain, but under such disguise as to be unrecognized as such. It is hard to eradicate that which seems indigenous to nature, and primitive ideas cling obstinately to primitive customs. The geographical distribution of totemism is very wide, but interesting as might be the subject in general, we will look upon it only as it relates to the Indians in our land, where it is found in its primitive form.

Perhaps a definition of a totem would place the subject clearly before us: "A totem is an object between which and himself the savage

believes an intimate and special relation exists, and which he regards with superstitious respect, from which often he claims descent." It is his manitou or protecting angel.

The word totemism was first used in 1792 by an interpreter who applied the term to the practice of the Indians of the Northwest, especially in regard to their belief in animal ancestry.

An Algonquin legend runs thus: "In old times men were as animals, and animals as men. We know not how it was." This well illustrates the savage belief in the kinship of men and animals, and totemism is a material expression of that belief.

The totem pole is therefore the geneological tree, so to speak, and bears upon its top, or rudely carved upon its sides, the representation of the object from which the family claims descent—it may be a bear, a wolf, an eagle, a tortoise, or even a plant or a stone, and is reverenced.

This reverence with many tribes becomes animal worship, regarding the totem as in some way a re-incarnation of the spirit of ancestors, therefore it is one form of ancestor

worship. But a totem may exist without a visible expression, and its nature may be indicated by a species of freemasonry.

This belief lies at the root of most of the religious and civil customs among the Indians, and is a strong force in shaping their lives. Families and clans are divided according to it, marriage relations are governed by it. A man may not marry one of his own totem, so there are two totems in a family, and in case of quarrels the clan bond is the stronger, and families are divided.

On account of the communal relations, the line of descent is reckoned on the mother's side, for a child may not always know his own father.

This rule as to marriage is called *exogamy*, and is rigidly observed. Some tribes say of those who marry within the clan that their bones will dry up and they will die, and with some, death is the penalty for a breach of this rule.

As to whether totemism had its origin in the religious idea as to animal and ancestor worship, or a composite of nature worship, opinions differ, but whichever be true, its prohibition as to marriage is universal.

Among the Creek Indians a man of the panther clan not only may not marry a panther woman, but he may not marry one of as near kin as a wild-cat woman.

There are three kinds of totems: First, that of the clan, passing by inheritance from generation to generation; second, that common to all the males or females of the tribe to the exclusion of the other sex; third, the individual totem, not passing to descendants.

A savage will not kill nor eat his totem animal unless compelled by dire necessity, and then with many apologies, saying, "I am sorry," solemnly touching his head and breast, "to eat my friends." There are many curious notions as to what would befall one who should eat his totem, but the strictness with which this prohibition is observed varies with different tribes.

This intimate relation is of mutual benefit, for the man will not harm his clan animal, and the animal will not harm him, he believes; as a bear will not hurt a man of the bear clan, a snake man will not fear the poison of snakes, and so strong is this confidence that a test is sometimes applied to prove the worthiness of a clan member.

Both asylum and hospitality are insured by the totem. When an Indian goes to a strange village, he feels entitled not only to food and shelter, but protection by one of his own totem, and he must even give a dance for him should he ask it—a fraternal relationship quite subject to abuse, one would think.

There may be many clans each with its own totem, but all united for a tribal name, under that of the chief family.

The totem is carved upon canoes, upon articles of domestic use, is tattoed upon the body, used upon amulets, and often used as seals in signing treaties—indeed, it is found everywhere among the Indians, although the totem pole is mostly confined to the Alaskan tribes. The inhabitants of a certain Alaskan Island recognized the Russians at first as cuttle-fish men, because of the buttons on their coats, thinking it their totem.

Some Indians think the Great Raven made the first people, and to them those of the raven tribe have the true blue blood of the red race. The California Indians claim the wolf as their ancestor, and they account for the loss of the tail by the habit of sitting. Among the

Delawares the tortoise claims supremacy, because he bore the world on his back.

The Mexican Indians say the first man sprang from a green stone, and all will at last return to stones, and they put into the mouth of their dead a small green stone—the principle of life.

The Chippewa reverence the dog and would not employ him to drag their sleds. So one might go through all the tribes, but suffice it to say, among all would be found totemism in some form as an integral part of their religious and social life.

But totemism is not confined to savage and barbaric peoples. The continued use and intense quest at the present day for heraldic designs is but a survival of the totem stage of development, and the more remote and apochryphal the creature, like the ideal griffin of antiquity' the more unquestionable is considered the line of noble descent.

The eagle of the United States, the lion rampant of England, the great bear of Russia the double-headed eagle of Austria, the lily of France; indeed, the emblazoned symbols of all nations, are in one sense the totems of these peoples, representing their supposed characteristic qualities.

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